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Focus on global issues: what makes for a successful city.

By Nicholas Brooke | [Real Estate Issues](#) – Winter, 2003

Perhaps I should start by introducing myself. I am proud to be the 135th President of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, with whom CRE enjoys a close and cordial strategic relationship. We share a common objective which is to promote the highest standards of professionalism in real estate worldwide. In this connection therefore it is my pleasure to contribute the first of a series of articles which I hope will contribute to the ongoing debate of what makes for a successful city.

Given that half the world's population now lives in cities, compared with only 2% in the year 1800 and 35% in 1970, it is important to understand what are the key factors that are crucial to the long-term success of any city. Within ten years it is estimated that there will be at least 30 cities with a population of over 10 million people, of which at least 22 will be in developing countries and the majority of these in Asia.

The reality is that cities can turn their fortunes around, often with surprising speed if they get the formula right. Examples which come to mind include Dublin, Barcelona, and Helsinki in Europe and Shanghai, Sydney, and Dubai further afield.

Over the last few months I have been fortunate to visit many of these successful cities and I have identified a number of key components and drivers that I believe have put these cities ahead of the rest.

DIVERSITY

Economic, cultural and social diversity make for a vibrant city. Cities dependent on a single economic sector are always going to be vulnerable during an economic downturn. Diversifying its economic base must, therefore, be a top priority for any city. Moreover, cities that embrace diversity in all its forms--including cultural and ethnic diversity--seem better equipped to generate the creativity that cities need, making themselves attractive to the skilled migrants that have been so integral to the economic success of cities around the world.

GOOD GOVERNANCE

Cities--particularly rapidly growing ones--need an understanding of how to install and maintain the infrastructure and services that underpin good quality city environments. All this needs competent, effective local governance structures, something all too lacking in many developing countries and not a few developed ones. Good governance demands strong civic leaders with a vision of where they want to take their city and an economic strategy that embraces partnership with local businesses.

A SKILLED WORKFORCE

Businesses today need skilled and dependable workers and will go wherever they must to find them. This means that cities need to invest in education and training and develop close working relationships between their schools, universities and business. They also need to create the kind of environment that will attract skilled workers to them and put the best of talent from the academic world and foster a culture of innovation, research and development.

QUALITY OF LIFE

In a globalising world the creative people that cities need have many choices. The evidence is that they are attracted to cities which offer not just financial rewards but the quality of life to which they aspire. Many of the cities, such as Barcelona, which consistently score highly in inter-city comparisons have capitalised on their historic assets whilst renewing their city and underpinning its cultural institutions.

CONNECTIVITY

Good communications both to the outside world and within the city are crucial. Without a good airport and, where appropriate, international rail links no city can make the leap to world league status. Similarly, good internal communications, underpinned by adequately funded public transport provide the essential infrastructure for the movement of people, goods and services.

PHYSICAL RENEWAL

The physical regeneration of cities--the renewal of its buildings and infrastructure--is almost invariably a key part of any successful urban strategy. In many cases the renewal of a key area of the city acts as a focus for national and international attention as well as generating civic pride and the 'buzz' that the city is on the move. But physical regeneration only works if it is combined with social regeneration--the creation of real communities with the services including health and education needed to support them.

A CULTURE OF INNOVATION

Innovation--the introduction of new techniques and processes--is the key to creating the knowledge-based industries that generate high standards of living. Over the last 30 years a large part of the growth in output in developed countries has resulted from innovation. Innovation depends on a strong research and innovation base and the creation of networks, involving both the public and private sectors, for generating and sharing knowledge.

A BUSINESS FRIENDLY CULTURE

If a city is to compete effectively it must seek to create a business-friendly environment. Unless it can generate large scale employment then it will not create the wealth that must underpin every aspect of its life and culture. This is no longer simply a matter of light regulation and low taxes, important as these are, but also requires the fostering of a culture of research, innovation and education.

A DISTINCTIVE BRAND

If a city aspires to be a player on the global stage then it must carve out a distinctive identity. The threat through globalisation and other factors of cities being transformed into "anywhereville" must be resisted. Cities must fight hard to preserve their distinctive character or "soul" and development must be in tune with the spirit of the place.

THE CITY-REGION RELATIONSHIP

Successful cities almost invariably lie at the heart of successful regions. Understanding the relationship and how it can work to the mutual benefit of both the city and region is crucial. Increasingly the trend is to develop city-regional solutions on an informal or formal basis that can develop the spatial framework needed to achieve economic competitiveness.

In summary: success, if it is to be sustainable, must not be built on too narrow a base. For instance, simply to offer a cheap pool of labour is no longer enough. Long-term success has to be founded on, and demands, the transformation of a city into a place that is economically and culturally diverse and offers a high quality of life. Getting the balance right also requires civic leaders with a strategic vision for their cities. In essence this is the challenge to which all cities that aspire to elite status, must respond.

ABOUT OUR FEATURED COLUMNIST

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